An appropriate Piety
Matthew 5:14-16; 6:1-18
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John McCormick Buchanan
Broad Street Presbyterian Church
Columbus, Ohio

George Santayana once remarked that to try to be religious "in general" is like trying to speak language in general. It cannot be done. We speak one language or another and we are religious in this way or that way, not in general. (See Harvey Cox, The Seduction of the Spirit, P. 317)

We have been religious in a particular way this morning: the Presbyterian way, to be precise. We have participated in a rite that is peculiar and that defines this as a Presbyterian Church, and as a Presbyterian people. The rite of ordination is uniquely Presbyterian: there are few symbols or gestures that set us apart from other denominations – and this is one of them.

And for those very reasons it is somewhat of an anachronism for many people. Within the context of public worship it is inconvenient: it involves a certain degree of confusion, what with rather large numbers of people milling about, some of them standing, others kneeling. It is time consuming, absorbing a major portion of our worship hour. And yet, I confess that I am always deeply moved by the ceremony. I would illustrate by way of a story.

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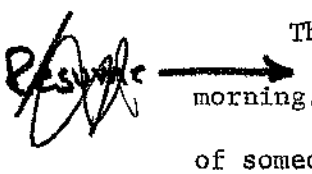
In his recent book, The Seduction of the Spirit, Harvey Cox describes a World Council of Churches conference on the ethical problems posed by scientific technology. For five days the conferees were deluged with papers, reports, and eloquent pleas for the church to become relevant. Throughout the conference Cox sat near to a Bishop of the Ukrainian Orthodox Church, "vested in flowing robe and long beard, trying manfully to listen to the thousands of words pouring into his headphone from the simultaneous interpreter in the glass booth at the side of the hall. He never said a word throughout the whole five days.

At the end of the conference, when all our heads were buzzing with ideas, arguments, charts and graphs, someone apparently thought it would be a nice idea to ask him to pronounce the benediction. When he had listened to the translation of the request and was sure he knew what was expected, he rose to his full height, smoothed his robe, beard and flowing locks and strode to the front of the hall, his bishop's miter in hand. He stood facing the assembly and blessed us all with a sweepingly expansive sign of the Cross. Then, holding his hand high, he began to pray in a language I had never heard. Apparently few others had ever heard it either, because the simultaneously translating receivers went dead. People at first switched from channel to channel, then stopped. The interpreters in the glass booths looked at one another in panic, shook their heads, then sat silently. The Bishop's prayer swelled and receded like ocean waves. After several minutes it stopped." Cox discovered later that the language in which the Bishop prayed was Old Slavonic, the archaic liturgical language of his Church.

Cox summarizes,"The well-known irrelevancy of the Eastern Orthodox Church and the equally notorious irrelevancy of prayer had once again been irrefutably documented in our midst.

"Or had they? I felt, on the contrary, that we had just witnessed the most significant episode of the conference...Though he was probably unaware of it, the Bishop had reminded us that there are areas of the human life which are simply not reducible to technological or even political relevancy." (P.326,7,8)



That story, in part, illustrates my feeling about what we have done this morning. We understand, of course, the installing of Trustees: the necessity of someone to manage the corporate affairs of this organization.

But why all the praying, the pious vows, the kneeling and laying on of hands? Why Elders and Deacons? Why not call them the Board of Directors and be ~~really~~ relevant?

And yet → I confess that I am moved by the ceremony precisely because it is a bit curious and anachronistic: precisely because it ~~does not relate very concisely to the~~ particular is uniquely Presbyterian; Presbyterianism does not have many gestures or symbols that are particular. ~~every day practice of assuming responsibility for all the organizations that populate our calendar.~~ But this - the ordaining of lay people - is ours..

It reminds me always of the occasion when I too knelt and felt the weight of hands on my head. Beyond that it reminds me of growing up in a Presbyterian Congregation when a group of venerable elderly men always sat in the front pews on Communion Sunday. That was at the end of the era when election to the Session of a Presbyterian Church was for life and elders were, inevitably, elderly men.

Beyond that, the ceremony reminds me that it has been done in much the same way for more than four hundred years: in Geneva, Switzerland, as John Calvin laid his hands on the heads of the Elders of the Consistory: in Scotland, when it was the Presbyterian Kirk and those ordained often signed a covenant with their own blood to defend the purity of the faith and the peace of the Kirk,

And beyond that, even, to those earliest days of Christian history, when struggling communities of faith met in catacombs and darkened houses and elected people from their own number to bear responsibility for the life of the Church. They were called "Presbyteros" in Greek, which translates "Elders", and they were set aside for their responsbility by prayer and the laying on of hands.

All that is behind us as we set aside men and women from among our number to bear responsibility for the life of this Church as Elders and Deacons and Trustees. ~~They will not receive many accolades for their efforts. But what they do and how they do it, all the night meetings, all the planning, all the hours they invest, will be the power that will propel this Church into the near future.~~ We have said something about where authority lies in our church: not w/ the clergy - not with a hierarchy - but here - with the elected representatives of the people. We have also said something about the vexing question of how to live as a Xtian in the world - for we have elected, ordained & installed - people like ourselves. They will spend more time here than anyone else - but they have not been asked to do anything that would change who they are ~~We have recognized them and ordained them and instituted them in a ceremony that is a peculiar bit of Presbyterian piety. We will not do it again for another year. This symbol of our particularity is not something we do every Sunday~~ them- for us...

. And on this occasion I thought it might be good to raise the question of what, beyond the rituals and liturgies that transpire in this building, is an appropriate piety for ~~twentieth century Christians?~~ What is the unique life-style of the Christian? What does a Christian Do?

Sometimes people decline to be officers in the Church because they don't feel "religious" enough. Sometimes people attend but don't join the church for the same reason: they don't feel "religious". That is to say, they have an idea about what constitutes the Christian life: they have some standard, some list of things a Christian is supposed to do, some definition of piety: and the simple fact is that they are neither conforming to that definition nor are they very excited about the prospect of conforming. And so they back away. And it is at this point that the question of an appropriate piety becomes rather important, and the matter of who will do the defining even more important. I believe it was Mark Twain's trenchant observation of piety that if heaven was anything like some of the Church services he had attended, he was glad he was going to hell.

Let us begin with two soundings. The first is that motives - the reasons we do what we do - are never very simple. Sometimes they are hidden, unconscious and with a nod in the direction of our traditional Calvinism we might even submit that no motive is entirely pure. Motivationally, we are ~~a mixed bag - to use the vernacular~~ extremely complex. We do good things, sometimes for the wrong reason: sometimes we have all the right reasons and what we do turns out terribly wrong: inside each of us is a labyrinth of motives and needs and desires that no one comprehends totally, least of all ourselves.

Consider love, for instance. Romantic love between a man and woman. What creates it: what motivates it to happen: what causes us to feel it? Is it just there, lying dormant in our psyche, waiting for that magic moment when the right person happens along? Is it a pristine, pure emotion that flows from the heart? Is it simply a prudish rationalization for lust? Does love exist in a vacuum or is it dependent on someone to return it? Dante loved Beatrice from a distance: he worshipped her. But he never met her. And realism demands that we recognize the mythology of pure, ~~unassumed~~ unanswered love. We love, partly because we feel it, but also - at least in part - because we are interested in being loved. Take that away: take away the possibility of our receiving something and our feelings of love are likely to diminish and evaporate.

The practice of religion - piety - may be substituted for love in that analysis. We are religious because we feel it, but there are side benefits as well. Who is to say which are more important? It is an act of piety to get up out of bed on a damp, cold January morning and come to Church: and we do it because we feel we ought to or need to. But it doesn't hurt to know that our neighbors will see us and perhaps think highly of us.

It is an eloquent testimony to our convictions

(*) I get weary of the suggestion that church people are hypocrites — go to be seen: I know better - more importantly I know the naivete of the assumption that motives are simple..

It is perhaps a gesture of even deeper piety to get out of bed every morning and engage in a totally private period of prayer. But even in private we can serve as both actor and audience. We like what we have done: it has made us feel good: we have reason to congratulate ourselves. In fact, the self is often a more congenial and generous audience than any of the people we will encounter during the day. That is the first sounding. Human motives are very complex and we need to exercise great caution whenever we think we know why people do the things they do.

other part of question - can't judge motives, church people are not any more

The second sounding has to do with the going cultural definition of piety. Webster defines pious as "manifesting devotion: zealous in prayer and acts of worship", and piety as "dutifulness in religion: devotedness". Now, our culture assumes that it knows what that means for the Christian and expects certain behavior. Our culture assumes, for instance, that it is appropriate piety to have prayer at P.T.A. meetings, football games and service club banquets. Our culture assumes that piety means a certain limitation in vocabulary. ~~The people in West Virginia who are so incensed about the books their children are reading out of their Christian principles I would guess would not have become nearly so angry if the authors had used words of two or three syllables rather than words of four letters.~~ A metropolitan daily paper interviewed a man who was willing to discuss his experience on Pearl Harbor on December 7, 1941. In the course of the interview he referred to the attackers by combining the Lord's name and a racist stereotype of the crudest variety. The next day the office was flooded with calls and letters protesting the use of the Lord's name in vain, but nary a word about the crude racism. I don't know if God ever laughs in his heaven - but surely he must be amused at the superficiality of some of our piety.

(*) i.e. religious people don't use certain words.. Ministers esp. this when walking into a conversation and hearing a few descriptive ways to say that speaker is embarrassed to discover that a minister heard .. as if the words themselves are somehow offensive to a religious person - but no one else.

Check Time

Jesus had quite a bit to say on the subject. In fact, he lived in a culture that thought it knew all there was to know about the practice of religion. And He seemed to have a running conflict with the proponents of that piety throughout His ministry.

To the first century Jew piety was a way of life. A devout man practiced his religion in three basic ways. First, alms giving. A good Jew gave a tithe, one tenth of all he had, and on top of that he gave alms for charity and the support of the poor. The tithe was expected: alms were the extra amount which the very righteous gave. At certain times a trumpet was sounded to signal a special alms offering. And Jesus suggested that some men were using that occasion for a public demonstration of their generous piety. He suggested that the man who was ~~solely~~ solely interested in doing God's will would be so inconspicuous about it that the left hand would not even know what the right hand was doing.

Second, prayer. Three times daily, a good Jew stopped what he was doing, turned toward Jerusalem and prayed. Jesus suggested that some men were arranging to be on the busiest street corner or in the middle of the market place at the appointed time. And that their praying was done for the benefit of the audience. He suggested that appropriate piety was finding a secret place for prayer.

Third, fasting. As an act of penance and devotion fasting was prescribed three times yearly. But the really pious fasted twice a week, on Monday and again on Thursday. It was the custom to be very visible about it; to dawn a sack cloth, smear mud and ashes on one's face and walk about the crowded streets moaning. Jesus' flat suggestion was that it was all for show: that these fasters were actually supremely enjoying their self-imposed suffering,

and that the goal of this piety was clearly public recognition. Appropriate fasting, He told them, was invisible. ("Wash your faces - no one ought to know what you are about but God.")

Now, if you are ~~of a mind to~~ so inclined, you can take this data and conclude that Jesus was an opponent of all institutional religion and all the acts of piety which express corporate religion.

But that is too simple. The Biblical evidence is that Jesus assumed that His disciples would give alms and pray and fast. He was no opponent of organized, institutionalized religion. What He opposed, with a frightening degree of honesty, was phony piety. The hypocrites, as He called them, were religious - or pious - in order to be seen and recognized. And they got their reward. They were applauded by the gallery. The account was closed and He wanted no part of it. Yet He refrained from attacking piety, appropriatedly practiced.

In fact, He said, "Let your light so shine before men that they will see your good works and give glory to your father who is in heaven."

There is a paradox - "Beware of practicing your piety before men" and "Let your light so shine". What He meant, I would suggest, is that Christian Discipleship is to be practiced in the world and will be, inevitably, highly visible. But acts of devotion, religious acts that could be the cause of admiration are not to be done for the sake of display. They are, rather, private matters of the heart. One New Testament interpreter puts it this way, "Show when tempted to hide; hide when tempted to show". (Expositors' Greek testament)

Jesus Christ called His men to a life of discipleship, a disciplined life of following Him in the world. ~~That is the only model for an appropriate practice of religion~~. His def. of religion

At the beginning of His ministry He revealed the concerns that would influence him: "good news to the poor, release to the captives, sight to the blind, liberty for the oppressed". These were the things that really mattered. Reconciliation, peace, love, standing with the poor - these counted for more than how many times a day a man prayed.

He warned them that this life of discipleship would be risky business. People would misunderstand - just as they still misunderstand when a Christian person does not conform to the going cultural definition of piety. He warned them that if they followed Him they would be conspicuous - and they would be persecuted. But He never said that about praying or fasting. Traditional piety offends no one: Christian discipleship may offend a lot of people.

The world expects Christians to be visible, but within certain prescribed limits. The world expects the church to condemn rampant immorality, gambling, drinking: the world expects the Church to have something to say about religious observances, obscenity and pornography. Those are safe: they fit the pattern of piety which our culture expects from religious people. And it is a very tempting game to play. The rewards are success and popularity and the applause of the gallery.

But when the church corporate or Christians individually break out of that mold and begin to follow Jesus Christ into those areas of life that were - for Him - the appropriate arena of piety, the going will become tough. Faithful Christian Discipleship may not be any more popular today than it was at the time of our Lord's life.

So, we have ordained and installed and recognized. We have said, in a particular way, that we are a Church: that we are committed, together, to follow Jesus Christ.

today - as every day

And the issue for all of us - now becomes the form our piety will take in the world: the challenge is to discover courage to take us outside the safety of these walls to make our statement and live our commitment in the world.

Jesus called His disciples to follow Him and paid very little attention to the niceties of the religious behavior. They were common men: Peter was known to utter a curse on occasion. Jesus accepted them as they were, and asked them only to be themselves, to be honest and to follow Him in a life of loving and serving.

He calls us too - Ministers, Elders, Deacons, Trustees, people - to that same life. And that, I would submit, is a very appropriate piety. AMEN.

Father, forgive us when we practice our piety for the gallery. And give the us courage to be honest disciples in ways that may be applauded by no one - but You: Through Jesus Christ our Lord.

Amen.